

A TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR

SECRET SOLDIERS

FOR USE
WITH COMMON
CORE STATE
STANDARDS

KEELY HUTTON
SECRET
SOLDIERS

FOUR BOYS. ONE DEADLY MISSION.

HC 978-0-374-30903-9 • Ages 10–14

ABOUT THE BOOK

Secret Soldiers follows the journey of Thomas, a thirteen-year-old coal miner, who lies about his age to join the clay kickers—a specialized crew of soldiers known as “tunnelers”—in hopes of finding his missing older brother. Thomas works in the tunnels of the Western Front alongside three other boys whose constant bickering and inexperience in mining may prove more lethal than the enemy digging toward them. But as they burrow deeper beneath the battlefield, the boys discover the men they hope to become and forge a bond of brotherhood.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KEELY HUTTON is a novelist, educational journalist, and former teacher. She is the recipient of the Highlights Foundation Writers Workshop scholarship at Chautauqua. She worked closely with Ugandan child soldier Ricky Richard Anywar to tell his story in her first novel, *Soldier Boy*.

THIS GUIDE IS ALIGNED WITH COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS FOR GRADE SEVEN BUT CAN BE APPLIED TO GRADES FIVE THROUGH EIGHT. TO ATTAIN SPECIFIC COMMON CORE GRADE-LEVEL STANDARDS FOR YOUR CLASSROOM AND STUDENTS, YOU ARE ENCOURAGED TO ADAPT THE ACTIVITIES LISTED IN THIS GUIDE TO YOUR CLASSES' NEEDS. YOU KNOW YOUR STUDENTS BEST!

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

- Talk about the relationship between courage and fear. Can someone be brave and still be scared? Is an act more courageous if the person is scared and still does it? Or is it more courageous if the person isn't afraid?
- Can a secret be a good thing? Can it be a bad thing? Give examples of each on a personal level and on a broader level, such as during a war.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The book opens with pages that are black with white print and tell the story of someone who is not named. Who are these chapters about? When did that become clear to you? What is happening to that person? Why do you think the person is unnamed, and why do you think the pages are black?
2. Why do you think the story is told in a third-person, omniscient narration? Do you consider one of the characters the main character? Explain your answer. The narration discloses the thoughts and feelings of characters, not just their words and actions. What is the impact of that approach on the reader?
3. Describe Thomas, his mission, and his relationship to his brother. What kind of person is he? Why is he so intent on finding James? What burden do his actions put on his parents? How does Thomas change in the course of the novel?
4. George jokes a lot, but he has had a hard life. What do we learn about his background? Describe his personality and the different sides of him revealed in the story. Discuss what this statement tells you about him: “If he’d given in every time life kicked him in the teeth, he would have died years ago.” (p. 206–207)
5. Explain what we learn about Charlie’s earlier life and how it affects him as a soldier. Why did he leave home? What does he feel guilty about, and why? How does he deal with his problems?
6. Frederick acts superior but feels inferior to those around him in some ways. Describe his family and education. How is his family history a burden for him? What does the white feather mean, and how does it symbolize his fears about himself? Why do he and George clash so often in the first part of the book?
7. Describe the older members of the crew, such as Bagger. How do the men treat the four boys? What advice do they give them? How do the men try to protect younger crew members? What do the boys eventually realize about the men and their backgrounds?
8. Talk about how the four boys evolve into a close-knit group. What actions help bring about their closeness? How do George and Frederick overcome their differences? How does working as a team help them at various points in the story?
9. George likes to give everyone a nickname, as do the other clay kickers. Discuss the different nicknames, why they are given, and how they change, if they do. Why does it matter when George says “Thomas” instead of “Tommy”? What is the significance of George not knowing his own last name?
10. How are secrets central to the story in different ways? What makes the tunnelers “secret soldiers”? What secrets do some of the characters keep and eventually reveal? Discuss the insight Thomas’s mother gives him: “A secret can be a friend or a weapon.” (p. 25) Give examples of how that is true in the novel.
11. Discuss George’s statement to Frederick: “What matters is you came here anyway, and when your crew needed you, you were there for them, despite being scared. That’s real courage.” (p. 244) Talk about the relationship between fear and courage in different parts of the story.
12. Talk about the epilogue and what it reveals. When and where does it take place? What do you learn about the past two years? How did it make you feel, and why? What do you think the future might hold for the boys?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. All four boys are too young to enlist in the army, and yet they end up serving as soldiers. Children and adolescents have chosen or been coerced into serving in the military throughout history. Have students work in pairs to research an example of this using digital and print sources, and have them report their findings to the class.

CCSS.SL.7.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.W.7.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation.

2. Hold a discussion of the book's opening poem, "Dulce et Decorum Est," by Wilfred Owen, and "For the Fallen," by Laurence Binyon, which Charlie quotes on page 305. Have students find other World War I poems by Owen, Binyon, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and other poets. Ask students to meet in small groups to share and discuss the poems they found memorable. (One good source is Oxford University's First World War Poetry Digital Archive: [ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/](http://www.ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/))

CCSS.RL.7.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.SL.7.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

3. As a class, watch the short BBC video about the origins of the British WWI tunnelers titled "Hellfire Jack and His Moles and Clay-Kickers," which includes a demonstration of the work that Thomas and the others did in the tunnels. Hold a class discussion that relates the video information to the novel. Have students compare reading about tunneling with seeing it in a video. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each format? (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zggykqt>)

CCSS.RL.7.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.SL.7.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

4. *Secret Soldiers* explores only a few aspects of the war in depth. Ask students to find another aspect of the war that interests them, such as its origins, alliances, specific battles, songs, chemical warfare, role of ships and planes, women's roles, and so on. Students should prepare a multimedia presentation on their topic to give to the class.

CCSS.SL.7.5 Include multimedia components and visual displays in presentations to clarify claims and findings and emphasize salient points.

CCSS.W.7.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation.

5. What does Frederick write in his journal? Invite students to choose a scene in the novel that features Frederick and make journal entries about the scene from his point of view using a first person voice. The entries should explain what happened from his perspective and express how he felt about the events and about the others involved.

CCSS.RL.7.3 Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot).

CCSS.W.7.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

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